

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 14 November 2017

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

Attendance

Ann Beech	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Tina Clements	David Smith
Maureen Compton	Simon Tagg
Keith Flunder	Bernard Williams
Julia Jessel (Vice-Chairman)	Paul Woodhead
Bryan Jones	

Also in attendance: Mark Deaville, Helen Fisher, Gill Heath and Mark Winnington

Apologies: Candice Yeomans

PART ONE

58. Declarations of Interest

Paul Woodhead declared an interest in the item on the Countryside Estate as he had taken part in the Campaign for Save Our Countryside, and was also helping a community group establish themselves at Sevens Road Woodland, part of the Countryside Estate.

59. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 10 October 2017

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 10 October 2017 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

60. Supported Bus Network

The Select Committee had considered a report in July 2017 which had provided details of the public consultation on bus journeys subsidised by Staffordshire County Council. The eight week consultation had taken place between July and September 2017. The report had highlighted that over 90% of bus passenger journeys in Staffordshire were undertaken on the commercial bus network with the authority currently providing funding for less than 10% of the bus journeys which were not commercially viable.

In February 2016, having considered its duty under section 63 (1) (a) of the Transport Act 1985, the Council agreed to provide a sum of £600,000 per annum from 2018/19 onwards, which when combined with the Bus Services Operator Grant (BSOG) would provide a total budget of £1.3m to enable bus journeys which would not be possible on the commercial bus network. The consultation suggested four options on how the agreed allocated funding could best be spent. The consultation document explained

that Option 1 – Revised Local Supported Bus Services (no Connect or Demand Responsive Services) – was the preferred option as it retained the greatest number of existing bus journeys whilst minimising the public subsidy for each passenger trip. In some cases this amounted to £13.66 per journey. In terms of general concerns raised by respondents, these included social isolation, access to services including health and retail, potential social and health care impacts and more limited education and employment access due to a lack of suitable alternatives for them. The results of the consultation analysis indicated that there was most agreement from respondents for Option 1.

Member discussed this in two parts, consideration of the options proposed and consideration of the consultation.

In referring to the £13.66 subsidy the Cabinet Member had mentioned that part of the objective in addressing this was to meet MTFs requirements. It was queried whether this presented a moral and ethical question or whether it was purely financial. He responded that it was in fact both and whilst these were challenging times financially, the main objective was to look after the most vulnerable people in the community. It was also important to help people to help themselves, learn from best practice and be innovative.

Members expressed concerns that bus companies should be more business orientated, and requested that when the Cabinet Member met with them he discuss how they may adopt a more commercial approach and that they come forward with details of how they were planning to market their services and improve operationally. It would be important to work with them to keep routes open and also promote routes. Members also suggested that the County Council work with Parish and District Councils to encourage local community/voluntary transport schemes. Members considered that the My Staffs App could be developed to include details of community transport schemes and suggested that this might be an idea that the Community Support Members could take forward. It was also important to work closely with voluntary groups, possibly using pump primed funding to incentivise communities and organisations.

Members considered that more work was needed to encourage volunteers, including how to make volunteering easier and more attractive, and lobbying MPs to ask them to remove potential legal obstacles. It was thought that the concept of “People Helping People” could positively impact on volunteering, as could offering training, encouragement and support to volunteers. Members queried how concerns around social isolation for the most vulnerable would be monitored and benchmarked. The Cabinet Member assured them that he would give priority to addressing this matter, and that benchmarking would be against best practice across the country.

Members noted the budget of £600,000 within the MTFs for 2018/19, but queried whether this funding would be maintained for the future. They were informed that the current MTFs assumed that this money remained although it was noted that the BSOG monies were provided by central government and so were not in the direct control of the authority.

In regard to the consultation, members suggested that there may be an environmental impact as a consequence of Option 1, with air pollution being affected by an increase in

car journeys. In relation to community transport, members suggested that the Cabinet Member lobby MPs to propose changes to Section 19 Permits under the Transport Act which require not for profit passenger drivers to have the same permits as bus operators, as this stifled innovation. Members expressed disappointment at the low level of responses from MPs and local councils, and requested that they be supplied with a list of respondees. The Committee agreed to monitor the impact of the removal of bus subsidies going forward.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The comments of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee be fed back to Cabinet by the Cabinet Member for Commercial, prior to a final decision being made by Cabinet on 15 November 2017;
- b) A list of respondees to the consultation be provided to members of the Committee; and
- c) The Committee monitor the impact of the removal of bus subsidies going forward.

61. Progress on the Countryside Estate

The Committee received an update on the outcomes from the first phase of the Countryside Estate Review.

To effectively and sustainably manage the countryside sites going forward the County Council had agreed four alternative delivery models, as follows:

- Maintain council ownership and seek opportunities to increase income from existing sites by working with volunteers, communities, third sector organisations and private parties.
- Transfer management on a site-by-site basis to local community or voluntary sector groups such as parish councils.
- Establish a partnership to manage countryside sites in a particular area.
- Establish a not-for-profit trading company or trust to run and develop parts of the estate.

Members were informed that the first phase of the Review covered the management and maintenance of the 18 countryside sites that comprised the County Council's countryside estate. It did not include any other council-owned land, eg County Farms or the management of public rights of way (PRoW). Between December 2016 and March 2017 organisations interested in managing and delivering all or some of the countryside sites were invited to submit an Expression of Interest (EoI). In total, fourteen EoIs were received.

Proposed next steps under Phase 2 included a review of the current operating model, and a range of efficiencies and income generating measures which would be introduced in the short to medium term to ensure that the MTFs saving of £0.6m was met by 2018/19. These included:

- A car parking strategy for all appropriate countryside sites would be developed and implemented to ensure that income generating opportunities were maximised.
- Exploration of the “offers” at Marquis Drive Visitor Centre and at Chasewater Innovation Centre to improve the current offer and maximise income generating opportunities.

- Evaluation of existing contracts to identify savings (eg deer management, property care, vehicle management, etc.)
- A review of the operation of new Countryside Stewardship Schemes going forward.
- Development and implementation of a new operating model for the management and maintenance activity on country parks and PRow.

Members were informed that other steps were being taken in the interim to offset operating costs, including the introduction of car parking charges on larger sites. Members questioned what was being done to mitigate the impact of inconsiderate parking at Chasewater. They were informed that a number of regulatory measures were being introduced and would be monitored. The Car Parking Strategy which was being developed would also help to address this issue.

Members expressed the view that they would like to see a more radical and ambitious vision for both Chasewater and Marquis Drive. They referred to the site visits that they had undertaken in 2015 and expressed disappointment that nothing had been done to address the issue of the exclusivity of the catering contracts with Entrust and the impact that this was having on innovation. The Cabinet Member responded that this matter was being reviewed as part of an overall review of the wider Entrust contract. A management solution was being explored for the countryside estate and proposals for the procurement of this may be brought back to the Committee as part of the third phase of the Review.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The Committee’s comments on the outcomes from the first phase of the Countryside Estate Review and proposed next steps be noted by the Cabinet Member for Communities; and
- b) A further report be brought to the Committee for scrutiny in April 2018 on recommendations for the final phase of the Countryside Estate Review.

62. Infrastructure+ Improvement Plan and Performance Review / Highways Extra Investment

The Infrastructure+ contract commenced on 1 October 2014. During the summer of 2015 the Committee scrutinised the governance and reporting arrangements and on 24 April 2016 agreed an action plan of improvement with the then Cabinet Member for Economy, Environment and Transport. The first update was reported to the Committee on 15 November 2016. The nature of the Infrastructure+ Strategic Partnership was that it was readily able to adapt to the Council’s changing needs. This flexibility was being demonstrated during 2017/18 by delivering at short notice the commitment of extra investment in highway maintenance.

Of the eight recommendations, the following five were specific actions:

- Action 1 - Review technical language of auto updates (continuous)
- Action 2 - Provide an Infrastructure+ organisation chart (complete)
- Action 6 - A scrutiny member join the Infrastructure+ Customer and Communication Outcome Group (complete)

Action 7 - Request that local Planning Authorities publish “full details” of highway consultation responses (complete)

Action 8 - Officer meetings with Parish Councils to be notified to local members (complete)

The remaining three all related to ongoing provision of service:

Action 3 – Member’s Highway Guide

Action 4 – Gully emptying programme

Action 5 – Availability of highways service, contacts, programmes and performance information.

Members received a presentation on the Member’s Highway Portal, gully emptying and the progress of the extra £5m in-year (2017/18) investment in highway maintenance.

The extra £5m was made of three core elements:

- £2.5m to provide an extra 45,000m² of localised pothole repairs to reduce the overall backlog and enable faster and more comprehensive repairs;
- £2m towards hotspot-patching and resurfacing programme, targeting those locations with high levels of customer complaints and risk of personal injury or property damage, eg Barton Turns, Burton; Hill Top, Hednesford; and Bridgecross Road, Burntwood;
- £0.5m drainage improvements, targeted to locations causing repeat surface defects.

The first year of extra investment in road maintenance was having a positive effect in terms of reducing the number of long-standing low risk carriageway and footway pothole repairs to a more proportionate level. It enabled faster response times to new low risk customer reported potholes and embracing a “right first time” and single visit approach wherever possible.

Members reiterated a point made at earlier meetings of the need to keep them involved and informed of the highways plans on their patch. The Cabinet Member acknowledged the work that had taken place to date and that more work needed to be done in this regard using the My Staffs App where appropriate. Members also commented that they would like to see a more concerted approach to quality control.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The update on the progress on the previously agree Infrastructure+ Action Plan be received; and
- b) The update on progress with the extra £5m in-year (2017/18) investment be received.

63. Work Programme

The Select Committee received a copy of their 2017/18 Work Programme. Members noted that the following items be added:

- A further Update on the Countryside Estate
- SACRE Annual Report 2016/17
- Community Transport

Members agreed that the item on Superfast Staffordshire (Broadband) should be taken forward by the APMG on Improvement, and that the Scrutiny Manager would email the Committee seeking volunteers to sit on the Working Group on Elective Home Education.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The additions to the Work Programme be noted;
- b) The item on Superfast Staffordshire be referred to the APMG on Improvement;
and
- c) Volunteers should be sought to sit on the Working Group on Elective Home Education.

a) West Midlands Rail Briefing Note

Members discussed the briefing note that had been circulated on the West Midlands Rail Contract.

RESOLVED – That no further scrutiny of this matter was required.

Chairman